

HEALTH

Disease Prevention: Family History

Most of us know that we can reduce our risk of disease by eating a healthy diet, getting enough exercise, and not smoking. But did you know that your family history might be one of the strongest influences on your risk of developing heart disease, stroke, diabetes, or cancer? Even though you cannot change your genetic makeup, knowing your family history can help you reduce your risk of developing health problems.

Family members share their genes, as well as their environment, lifestyles and habits. Risks for diseases such as asthma, diabetes, cancer and heart disease also run in families. Everyone's family history of disease is different. The key features of a family history that may increase risk are:

- Diseases that occur at an earlier age than expected (10 to 20 years before most people get the disease);
- Disease in more than one close relative;
- Disease that does not usually affect a certain gender (for example, breast cancer in a male);
- Certain combinations of diseases within a family (for example, breast and ovarian cancer, or heart disease and diabetes).

If your family has one or more of these features, your family history may hold important clues about your risk for disease.

People with a family history of disease may have the most to gain from lifestyle changes and screening tests. You can't change your genes, but you can change unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, inactivity, and poor eating habits. In many cases, adopting a healthier lifestyle can reduce your risk for diseases that run in your family. If possible ask questions, talk to family members, look at death certificates and family medical records to understand your family history.

Collect information such as major medical conditions, causes of death, age of disease onset, age of death and ethnic group. Write down the information and share it with your doctor. Your doctor will assess your risk based on your family history and other risk factors, recommended lifestyle changes to help prevent disease and prescribe screening tests to detect disease early.

For more information on CDC's Office of Genomics and Disease Prevention, visit CDC's Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/genomics>.

Source: Centers of Disease Control and Prevention

